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Women Champions in the Energy Sector



Mariama Kamara
Founder/Director, Smiling Through Light

Photo credit: Mariama Kamara's personal photo archive



Mariama with local businesswomen in Lunsar, Sierra Leone

Photo credit: Mariama Kamara's personal photo archive

This portrait is part of the West Africa Energy Program and Women in Energy (WIE)-Ghana's series on women champions in the energy sector, featuring women who have overcome barriers, defied stereotypes, and succeeded in their chosen professions.

"We don't want to see women as just consumers. (Women) can play a role across the whole value chain. We are more than capable of doing that."

Mariama Kamara, founder of Smiling Through Light, was 9 years old when the civil war in Sierra Leone forced her to leave the country in 1992. Almost twenty years later, in 2011, Mariama returned home to work on a DFID reproductive health assignment with UNICEF and found an unexpected newfound interest in the energy sector. *"We traveled around the country and everywhere I went, I saw people using kerosene lamps and candles. I remember thinking, this is the 21st century. I used (these) growing up as a child to study. How can people still be using these dangerous products to light their homes? That's how 'Smiling Through Light' came about."*

Smiling Through Light focuses on clean energy access, providing clean, reliable, and sustainable energy through the distribution and sale of solar products, focusing on the last mile. *"Our key vision is to ensure that women, girls, and the communities have access to clean energy. We want to create jobs because I believe that that is what gets people out of poverty,"* says Mariama.

To date, Smiling Through Light has trained over 1000 individuals across the country on clean energy access using storytelling as opposed to conventional training methods. By developing stories around the *firefly* or *lighting bugs*, the organization has effectively engaged and educated local stakeholders and prompted discussions points around key stories and clean energy concepts. *"We also have an educational program under our 'One Child, One Lamp' campaign supporting nearly 400 school children in off-grid communities who cannot afford to buy solar lamps,"* says Mariama. Through its partnership with WB-IFC's Lighting Africa Program, Smiling through Light ensures that only accredited, quality-assured products are reaching customers.

Mariama believes in the power of women. All sales agents are female, and 80% of the entire team – staff and leadership - are comprised of women. *"Women are more effective (especially) on the ground. They are good communicators and community mobilizers. They*



Mariama during the STL launch in Lunsar, Sierra Leone

Photo credit: Mariama Kamara's personal photo archive



Mariama with young women from the BRAC Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) program.

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really understand sales.... We don't want to see women as just consumers. (Women) can play a role across the whole value chain – from leading product design, strategy (development), those sorts of things. We are more than capable of doing that.” Mariama adds, “In Sierra Leone, women deal with many societal constraints, that they have to just stay at home, that only men can be successful entrepreneurs... As a woman-owned energy business, we are changing those narratives and advancing gender equality.”

Smiling Through Light was a key player in pushing for renewable energy to be a key component of Sierra Leone's energy future. Mariama and a host of others passionate about clean energy lobbied the government for 5 years through DFID's Power4All initiative. Finally, in 2016, the Sierra Leonean government became the first country to sign the Energy Compact Agreement, which opened the space for renewables. The government made key commitments, including a target to electrify 1 million homes with solar products by 2020, removal of duty waivers and taxes on solar products coming into the country, and the setting up of the Renewable Energy Association of Sierra Leone (REASL). Smiling Through Light is also part of the SE4All People-Centered Accelerator partnership which gives Mariama a platform to talk about and advance Sierra Leone's energy as well as women's issues at a global level.

Throughout her career in the energy sector, Mariama has encountered many of the “usual challenges of working in a male dominated space” but feels a lot has changed in Sierra Leone, especially in the past two years. “There are maybe 5 to 6 key women in solar, mini-grids who are doing excellent work. (Their experiences) show young people that this is a ‘cool’ sector. You see people that look like you and you tell yourself, ‘I can do it.’” Mariama adds, “Another challenge African women face is funding. A lot of the funding just goes to international companies. For local entrepreneurs, funders often just offer training! We are trying to change that.”

Mariama's commitment to Sierra Leone is greater than empowering women and electrifying communities. Mariama is also hoping to change the narratives commonly associated with Sierra Leone. “Another big achievement of ours is setting up a sustainable business and changing the narrative of what doing business in Africa looks like. (Our experience dispels the notion) that there is corruption, there is no bookkeeping, and laws are not followed,” notes Mariama. “When you say Sierra Leone, people think of civil war, Ebola, and all that negative stereotypes. But there are also many young entrepreneurs and other positive things happening. We are changing the story from negative to positive,” she adds.

Mariama's advice to young women with an interest in the energy sector? “I completely believe that as individuals, as people, we are change agents. We have to be the change we want to see.... If you are passionate and have a clear vision, go for it. No one should hold you back. Don't listen to the noise.”